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"THE SALE OF THE HESSIANS." WAS BENJAMIN FRANKLIN THE AUTHOR?

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In 1874 John Bigelow first ascribed to Benjamin Franklin the famous satire and masterpiece of propaganda known as "The Sale of the Hessians," [1] which he had discovered in the *Correspondance secrète inédite sur Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, la cour et la ville de 1777 à 1792* (Paris, 1866).[2] This correspondence, published by Lescure from a manuscript in the Imperial Library at St. Petersburg, where it had been brought from a Warsaw library, was an anonymous newsletter comparable to the more famous Grimm-Diderot Correspondence. It was written for some important figure in Poland (perhaps the Chancellor Woronzof, or the king himself, Stanislas Poniatowski) who wished to be kept *au courant* of affairs in the French capital. According to M. de Lescure, the author or authors may have been Jean Louis Favier (1720?–1784), an adventurous protégé of Vergennes, or a M. du Bucq, *premier commis* of the Ministry of the Navy and friend of Choiseul and Mme du Deffand. In any case, the letters were written by a man or by men close to court, government, and financial circles.

"The Sale of the Hessians" (in French, of course) appears in this correspondence between the entries dated March 10 and March 13, 1777. Unfortunately it was inserted without comment or explanation other than the heading: "Copie d'une lettre du comte de Schaumberg, écrite de Rome le 18 février 1777 au baron d'Hohendorf, commandant les troupes hessoises en Amérique." Bigelow's argument for ascribing the letter to Franklin was based wholly upon internal evidence. He wrote, "Nor do I think I am doing Doctor Franklin any injustice in suspecting him of being its author. Since the death of Swift, who, besides Franklin, was sufficiently a master of this kind of satire to have written it?" [3]

Convinced of the soundness of his hypothesis, Bigelow translated the letter and included it in his *Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin* (1888).[4] Later students of Franklin and of the literature of the American Revolution have accepted the attribution and Bigelow's "Who else?" argument.[5] It has frequently been suggested that this might be the satire mentioned by Franklin in his letter to John Winthrop, May 1, 1777.[6]

Lescure's publication of the satire was not, however, the first, as has been sometimes assumed. The first, in all probability, was on March 10, 1777 in the *Correspondance littéraire secrète,* another confidential newsletter, published weekly in octavo at Neuwied, Germany, from 1774 to 1793 by Louis François Métra, Guillaume Imbert, and others.[7] Unfortunately no copy of the March 10 issue of this very rare periodical, of which no complete file is known, has been discovered in spite of a thorough search of the libraries of the United States, England, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy; but we can say with some certainty that it must have contained "The Sale of the Hessians," for the item appears under that date in the reprint of the same correspondence published by John Adamson in London in eighteen volumes duodecimo, 1787–1790, under the new title *Correspondance secrète, politique et littéraire, ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des cours, des sociétés et de la littérature en France, depuis la mort de Louis XV*.[8] Comparison of this reprint with surviving issues of the original *Cor-*

[1] *Life of Benjamin Franklin* **2**: 395, Philadelphia, 1874.
[2] Pp. 31–33.
[3] *Loc. cit.*
[4] **6**: 74–78.
[5] See Moses C. Tyler, *The literary history of the American Revolution, 1763–1783* **2**: 377–378, 380, New York, 1897; Paul L. Ford, *The many-sided Franklin,* 244–247, New York, 1899; John G. Rosengarten, American history from German archives, *Proc. Amer. Philos. Soc.* **39**: 129–154, 1900; *The writings of Benjamin Franklin,* ed. A. H. Smyth, **7**: 27–29, New York, Macmillan, 1906; Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin,* 574, New York, Viking, 1938. A noteworthy omission was in P. L. Ford's *Franklin Bibliography,* Brooklyn, 1889.
[6] Smyth, **7**: 57–58.
[7] See Eugène Hatin, *Bibliographie historique et critique de la presse périodique française,* 68, Paris, 1866.
[8] **4**: 193–196.

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respondance littéraire secrète for the year 1777 shows that while the reprint sometimes omitted items from the original text there appear to have been no additions. There is, therefore, little doubt that it was in the Neuwied publication that "The Sale of the Hessians" first appeared in print.

Louis François Métra (or Mettra), the publisher of this correspondence, has been frequently confused by Hatin and others with François Métra the *nouvelliste,* described by the Duke de Lévis in his *Souvenirs et portraits,*[9] an eccentric character, appropriately distinguished by what was said to be the longest nose in France, who constituted himself as a sort of amateur news analyst and purveyor of planted "news leaks," and who used to hold forth on the Terrasse des Feuillants of the Tuilleries until his death in 1786. The Métra who published the *Correspondance littéraire secrète* was a more serious figure, a Parisian banker who acted for many years as financial agent and purchaser of paintings and sculpture for King Frederick of Prussia. In 1772 or 1773 he became involved in some sort of serious trouble and was forced to flee to Neuwied, a small German state on the Rhine, where from June 1774 to March 1793 (or possibly later) he published his newspaper. He was joined there and assisted by Guillaume Imbert de Boudeaux (1744–1803), ex-Benedictine monk and literary hack, who also had been forced to take refuge in Neuwied after three imprisonments in the Bastille. There is, however, no indication of the name of the Paris correspondent who dispatched the news and gossip from Paris and who sent in March 1777 the text of "The Sale of the Hessians." [10]

It is worth noting that "The Sale of the Hessians" appeared in the *Correspondance littéraire secrète* under the same date, March 10, 1777, as in the Lescure correspondence. This may have been something more than a coincidence, for there were many entries identical in the two works, a fact which suggests that one was derivative from the other, or that they had a common source, or that there was cooperative trading of copy between the two correspondents. The texts of the "The Sale of the Hessians" in the two publications are identical except for variations in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, some of which may be the result of M. de Lescure's editing.

The next appearance of "The Sale of the Hessians" was in Baudouin de Guémadeuc's *L'Espion dévalisé.*[11] This work appeared in French editions in 1782, 1783, and 1784, and in one German translation, *Der Geplünderte Spion,* in 1783, all bearing a London imprint, though the French versions were published in Neuchâtel and the German was published in Leipzig.[12] Baudouin de Guémadeuc was a Breton who had a varied career in the magistracy, in literature, and in astronomy. At one time he was imprisoned for fifteen months on the charge of having stolen silverware from the table of M. de Miromesnil, Garde des Sceaux. His *Espion dévalisé* was a collection of scandalous anecdotes of doubtful authenticity which involved his Neuchâtel publisher in trouble with both the French and Prussian governments.

This third text contains a number of variations from the Lescure and Métra versions, not only in punctuation and spelling but also in the text itself. Frequently isolated words vary, one line occurs which is not found in the earlier texts, and two other passages, one of several lines and one of a single line, found in both Métra and Lescure, are omitted. Yet so much of the three texts is identical that there is no question that they all came from a common source. The variations in the Guémadeuc version are of such a nature as to indicate that they were probably errors in transcription from a manuscript copy (*mutilés* for *inutile; Aumérese* for *Crumerus,* etc.). It appears that the three versions are not derivative from one another, but that they were all made from more or less inaccurate manuscript copies of the original. Guémadeuc said in a footnote, "Cette plaisanterie fut distribuée en même temps que le pamphlet précédent" (Mirabeau's "Avis aux Hessois," printed on the preceding pages), the word *distribuée* being significant. All this seems to indicate that "The Sale of the Hessians" was part of the abundant clandestine literature of the period and that it circulated about Paris in multiple manuscript form. Its appearance can

[9] Gaston Pierre Marc, Duc de Lévis, *Souvenirs et portraits,* 183–184, Paris, 1815.

[10] See Edmond Scherer, *Melchior Grimm, avec un appendice sur la correspondance de Métra,* 459–477, Paris, 1887.

[11] *L'Espion dévalisé,* 205–209, Londres, 1782.

[12] Philipp Losch, Der Uriasbrief des Grafen von Schaumburg. Zur Geschichte der öffentlichen Meinung über den sogenannten Soldatenhandeln, *Hessische Chronik,* Zweiter Jahrgang, 85, 1913; and *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc.,* ed. M. Tourneaux, **13**: 236, Paris, 1877.

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be fairly certainly dated the first weeks of March 1777. Lescure and Métra provide a *terminus ad quem* of March 10 and the *terminus a quo* was about the middle of February, when the news of the Battle of Trenton (December 26, 1776) first reached Paris.

A fourth publication appeared many years later in *Anecdotes anglaises et américaines* (Paris, 1813), attributed to the Chevalier de l'Espinasse de Langéac,[13] a curious piece of war propaganda designed to paint the British in the worst possible colors. This drew its material from publications of the final years of the Ancien Régime, particularly from *Le Courrier de l'Europe,* Crèvecœur, Ramsay, and Franklin. This fourth text, while undoubtedly derived from the same original, contains a new set of variations and appears to have come, directly or indirectly, from a different manuscript copy. Here the letter was offered not as a *plaisanterie* but in all seriousness as an example of British barbarism.

In addition to these four variations of what may be called Text A, there also was a quite different Text B, which was published in pamphlet form in 1777 with the following imprint:

Lettre / du / Landgrave de Hesse,/ au / commandant / de ses / troupes en Amérique. 4to (21.5 x 12.5 cm.) A^4; pages 1–8. John Carter Brown Library, Providence; New York Historical Society.

This version is not, as has been supposed by several authorities, the same as Text A. It is much shorter and there is not even a single sentence or phrase identical. Moreover it is full of absurd misspellings, apparently intended to ridicule the French style of German Francophile monarchs and nobles. Frederick II, Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel, object of the satire, was notorious for his French ballet dancers, French theater, French librarian, and French mistress. In addition, a number of new elements, particularly of an anti-Jesuit character, are introduced. Yet it is essentially the same in form, in purpose, in satirical technique and, to a large extent, in content. Many sentences are merely rephrasings from Text A.[14] Unquestionably this is a rewriting of Text A, or—which seems less likely—Text A is a rewriting of this.

[13] 2: 148–152.

[14] This version has been reprinted, somewhat inaccurately, by Joseph G. Rosengarten, *op. cit.,* 149–150. A typographical examination of this item seems to indicate that it was printed in the Netherlands, probably in Amsterdam.

The subsequent history of the letter throws no additional light on its origin, but it does serve as a curious commentary on the influence of chauvinism on scholarship.

In 1847 a German-American historian Franz von Löher, in a work entitled *Geschichte und Zustände der Deutschen in Amerika* (Cincinnati, 1847, and Göttingen, 1855), printed a version of "The Sale of the Hessians" which appears, despite certain discrepancies, to be a much abridged translation derived from L'Espinasse's *Anecdotes anglaises et américaines.*[15] Löher, who voiced the hope that, for the honor of mankind, this was a fabrication, said his text had been printed in the *Reveille* of St. Louis, October 31, 1845, and that it was "said to be" (*soll stehen*) in Eugene Regnault's "Denkwürdigkeiten."

The first reference, which Löher claimed as his source and which was presumably either the *St. Louis Reveille,* a daily published 1844–1850, or the *Weekly Reveille,* also of St. Louis and published concurrently, is faulty. Neither periodical for that date contains the letter, and an extensive search has failed to discover it in any other issue. Indeed the character of the two papers is such that it seems unlikely that either would have published the item.[16] The second reference is also something of a mystery. It is probably the *History of Germans in America* (Leipzig and Cincinnati, 1847) referred to by Rosengarten,[17] but I have been unable to locate any copy of the work in any American library.

In any case, it seems to have been Löher who brought the letter to the attention of the German public, although Ernst Heusinger's *Achtundvierzig Jahre,* published in 1841, had already contained a reference to it, apparently based on *Der Geplünderte Spion* or one of the earlier French publications. After 1847 the letter was joyfully taken up by German democrats as ammunition for their attacks upon the House of Hesse-Cassel. Knobel, a Democratic deputy, is reported to have read

[15] Franz Löher, *Geschichte und Zustände der Deutschen in Amerika,* 182, Göttingen, 1855.

[16] I am indebted to Mrs. Gertrude L. Woodward of the Newberry Library in Chicago and to Professor William Holbrook of Northwestern University for their kindness in making extensive searches in the files of both periodicals.

[17] Rosengarten, *op. cit.,* 136. Rosengarten's statement that it was Regnault who first called attention to the letter in Germany seems doubtful, for the author of the *Grenzboten* article confessed a complete ignorance of both Regnault and his book.

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it in the Hessian Ständeversammlung September 1, 1848, and the National Liberal deputy Hammacher read it in the Prussian Diet on March 13, 1875.[18]

Undoubtedly, it was frequently reprinted, but the satire was completely missed by the Germans, who either accepted the letter as a dreadful example of the inhuman tyranny of petty German monarchs or was indignantly denounced as a libelous forgery.

In 1858 the periodical *Die Grenzboten* contained an article entitled "Landgraf Friedrich II. und die todten Hessen von Trenton," which reprinted Löher's version and offered evidence that the letter was a fabrication.[19] Further attempts to prove the falsity of the letter were made by Maximilian Joseph Carl von Ditfürth in his *Beitrag zur Geschichte der Kriege von 1792 bis 1809* (Cassel, 1864),[20] and again by the anonymous author of *Friedrich II und die neure Geschichtsschreibung* (Melsungen and Cassel, 1879).[21] The German-American historian Friedrich Kapp in his *Der Soldatenhandel Deutscher Fürsten nach Amerika* (Berlin, 1874) reprinted both Löher's text and also that of the *Lettre du Landgrave de Hesse*,[22] which he had discovered in the library of the New-York Historical Society. He recognized the letter as satirical propaganda, but of course was unaware of the attribution to Franklin, made that same year by Bigelow. That the letter was widely printed and well known in Germany is indicated by the fact that the sixth edition of Hermann Schrader's *Der Bilderschmuck der Deutschen Sprache* (Berlin, 1901) reprinted Löher's version, taking it as genuine, to explain the German expression *Ab nach Kassel* (off to Cassel, i.e., off to the slaughterhouse).[23] The latest German treatment of the letter seems to be Philipp Losch's article in the *Hessische Chronik* in 1913, "Der Uriasbrief des Grafen von Schaumburg," which gave valuable information on the history of the letter in nineteenth-century Germany but omitted any mention of the Métra, Lescure, and L'Espinasse versions or of the modern attribution to Franklin.[24]

Meanwhile the letter appeared frequently in the United States in an English version of the abridged text published by Löher. Kapp in 1874 wrote, "In Amerika glaubt man noch heute an seine Echtheit."[25] This was confirmed by the publication that same year of the Löher version, without question of its authenticity, in the *Boston Evening Transcript*[26] and in *Littell's Living Age*.[27] In 1902 the same text appeared in the *Papers and Addresses of the Lancaster County Historical Society*.[28] The historian Edward Jackson Lowell, who called it "a clumsy forgery," reported in 1884 that it had "been frequently published."[29]

Thus the letter has had a curious bifurcated later history: first revived by Germans and Americans who mistook its intention and heatedly debated its authenticity, and then a second time resurrected by Bigelow to be enshrined among the works of Franklin.

There seems to be little chance of finding conclusive evidence of its authorship. It may be said, however, with some assurance that Text B (*Lettre du Landgrave de Hesse*) is not from the same pen as Text A. Despite the similarities, there are obvious differences in style. B, heavyhanded and even vulgar in its satire, bears scant kinship to the deft irony of A and is almost certainly an inept imitation. In any case there seems little reason, if we must judge stylistically only, to ascribe it to Franklin.

As for Text A, there is to be considered the possibility that it originated in the Netherlands, where Étienne Luzac, the publisher of the *Gazette de Leyde*, was actively supporting the American cause with news and documents transmitted to him by C. G. F. Dumas, Franklin's secret agent; where the *Courrier du Bas Rhin* was likewise a supporter of American independence; and where the publisher Michel Rey, who was introduced to Franklin by Dumas, at this

[18] See Philipp Losch, *op. cit.*, 37–38; 39.

[19] Vol. 17, II Semester, III Band, pp. 92–101, 1858. The article was signed "D.L.," who, according to Rosengarten, *op. cit.*, 136, was "Keeper of the Archives at Cassel."

[20] Rosengarten, *op. cit.*, 136.

[21] Translated in abridged form and published by Joseph G. Rosengarten in *Penna. Mag. Hist. and Biog.* **23**: 157–183 (1899).

[22] Pp. 199–200; 255.

[23] Pp. 357–358.

[24] *Op. cit.* A valuable preliminary bibliography also appeared in Emil Meynen, *Bibliographie des Deutschtums der kolonialzeitlichen Einwanderung in Nordamerika*, Leipzig, Harrassowitz, 1937.

[25] *Op. cit.*, 201.

[26] Sept. 18, 1874.

[27] Fifth series, **8**: 64, 1874.

[28] Frank R. Diffenderffer, A Remarkable Letter, *Papers and Addresses Lancaster County Hist. Soc.* **6**: 85–89, 1902.

[29] *The Hessians and other German auxiliaries of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War*, 97, New York, 1884.

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same time engaged Mirabeau to write his *Avis aux Hessois*. No positive evidence, however, supports this hypothesis, for neither the *Gazette de Leyde* nor the *Courrier du Bas Rhin* published the satire.

Mirabeau has also been suggested as the author, but nothing in his writings or in the many studies of his life and works gives any clue to support such a supposition. Indeed it seems unlikely that in the same months that he composed the *Avis aux Hessois* he would have produced another propaganda piece identical in purpose but so very different from his usual style. He had sought refuge in Amsterdam, where he remained from October 1776 to May 1777 with his Sophie (Mme Mounier), with whom he had just eloped, supporting himself and his mistress by hack work, and he was probably not interested in unremunerative writing. In any case he would not have been one to conceal the authorship of such a piece. All available evidence, therefore, indicates that the squib, whatever its origin, made its first appearance in Paris.

In the problem of the authorship of this letter, the most significant fact is that there is absolutely no evidence that anyone before Bigelow attributed it to Franklin. It was the prime purpose of such confidential reporters and scandalmongers as Métra, Guémadeuc, and the author of the Lescure *Correspondance* to ferret out secrets, and we may be sure that had they come upon any hint that so prominent and popular a figure as Franklin had written this piece they would have reported it. Yet neither they nor any later publisher of the letter gave the slightest suggestion that Franklin could have been the author. In Franklin's own writings the only possible reference is the letter to John Winthrop, in which he said, "The Conduct of those Princes of Germany, who have sold the Blood of their people, has subjected them to the Contempt and Odium of all Europe. . . . I send you enclos'd one of the many Satires that have appeared on this occasion." This might refer to "The Sale of the Hessians," the *Lettre du Landgrave de Hesse,* Mirabeau's *Avis aux Hessois,* or some other satire now lost, but it certainly cannot be taken as an admission of authorship. If Franklin was indeed the author he kept the secret well.

Why did he do so? In March, 1777, he was still anxious to conceal his political purposes and it is likely that he would not have thought it wise to do more than to allow a manuscript translation to be circulated clandestinely among his friends. After the French entry into the war in 1778, however, such political caution would have no longer been necessary, yet the secret was still kept. There was of course no question of preserving the fiction that the letter was genuine, for probably few eighteenth-century readers were deceived by the hoax. Both Métra and Guémadeuc referred to it as a *plaisanterie*.

This perfectly preserved anonymity does not, of course, mean that Franklin could not have been the author, but it does seem to reduce in some measure the probability of the hypothesis.

In any case, we are reduced to the original stylistic argument, which would be stronger if we had an original English version and if we could accept Bigelow's assumption that no one in Europe in 1777 possessed the gift for satire here displayed. Are we to say (merely as examples) that this was beyond the talents of Voltaire or Beaumarchais?

On the other hand, three positive arguments remain: (1) Franklin was in Paris when the letter first appeared there; (2) both the hoax and the circulation of a clandestine manuscript were typical of his methods; and (3) the style, even in translation, does have the authentic Franklin flavor. His efforts to encourage Hessian desertions in America are well known,[30] and there is no doubt that after his arrival in France he was active in encouraging European indignation against the British use of German mercenaries.[31]

In the light of these facts it seems that while we may continue to attribute "The Sale of the Hessians" to Franklin, the attribution might be made somewhat more tentatively than has hitherto been the rule.

[30] See Lyman H. Butterfield, Psychological warfare in 1776: the Jefferson-Franklin plan to cause Hessian desertions, *Proc. Amer. Philos. Soc.* **94**: 233–241, 1950.

[31] *Calendar of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* Amer. Philos. Soc. **1**: 246; **4**: 224, Philadelphia, 1908.

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